

# Water of life and death

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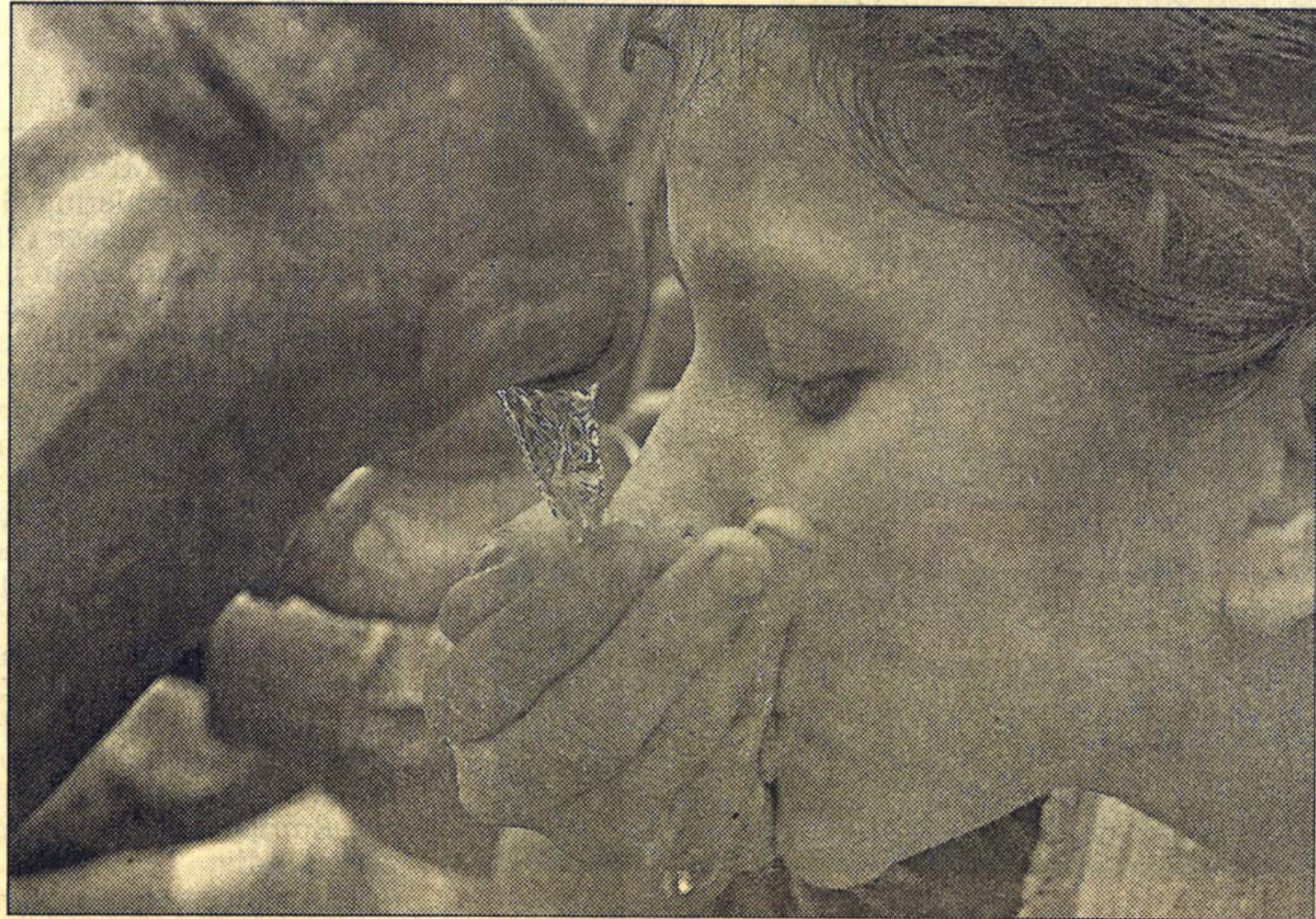
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**I**T'S A special offer from the Delhi Jal Board that most of us can well live without. The water-supply pipes are awash with a gaggle of viruses that cause diarrhoea, gastroenteritis, Hepatitis A and C, and typhoid.

"Most jaundice epidemics are caused by Hepatitis E, which is a self-limiting infection that lasts two to four weeks," says Dr S. K. Acharya, Professor of Gastroenterology at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences. "There's no treatment and precaution should be taken to drink safe water, especially by pregnant women, as they can suffer acute liver failure." Dr Acharya refuses to elaborate on the prevention aspects. "It's elementary knowledge, things you have been taught in Class III. Everyone knows drinking juice from a roadside kiosk can cause disease, just as muddy water you get at home from taps. They still do it," he shrugs.

When the don't care attitude comes home to roost, it's no fun. The symptoms of Hepatitis E include fever, headache, vomiting and nausea, jaundice with yellowing of the eyes and skin, extreme weakness, a bitter taste in the mouth and loss of appetite.

Recovery can take from two to six weeks, depending on the severity. The liver becomes tender and swollen. Patches of liver tissue may



**STATUTORY WARNING:** Drinking unpurified water in this time of year is a major health risk

be destroyed. The disease can be fatal for pregnant women.

In the recovery phase, patients must avoid alcohol for six months to minimise liver damage.

Another type of Hepatitis, Hepatitis A, is the most common cause of jaundice in children under five years. Most children in India develop a natural immunity to Hepatitis A, but the improving socio-economic scenario has a flip side. It is making kids more vulnerable to germs.

The disease is acute when it occurs in adults. A vaccine is available, which costs Rs 1,700.

Dr Ajay Kumar, Senior Consultant, Gastroenterol-

ogy at Apollo Hospital, lays stress on primary prevention. "We've started getting many cases of jaundice and diarrhoea, and now's the time that the bacterium *Salmonella Typhi* also starts contaminating drinking water, leading to outbreaks," he says.

While most people take the trouble to boil or filter water, they often overlook the quality of water used to wash fruit and vegetables. "If the salad you are eating has been handled by someone with unwashed hands or someone who has used contaminated water to wash the vegetables, you are at risk of disease," says Dr Acharya.

In the rains, the rising

water table and rusted and cracked water supply pipes add to water contamination. "Sewage overflows and contaminates drinking water, bringing disease into our homes," says Dr Kumar.

The most common infection is diarrhoea, which can be caused by viruses or bacteria. Viral diarrhoea is the most common, and is usually self-limiting, lasting for a few days. High toxicity — with high fever and bloody stools — are usually caused by bacterial diarrhoea. This needs antibiotic treatment.

The bottomline: prevention is better than cure. A good water purification system is mandatory.